

Bucher's 'To Be or Not to Be'

By Richard L. Coe

From the records about North Korea's seizure of the U.S.S. Pueblo, Stanley R. Greenberg has created an absorbing piece of theater which Arena Stage has mounted magnificently.

"Pueblo's" strength lies in the author's determination to hew sharply to the record. He has said: "When a name is used, it is the real name of a real person. When a synthesized character is introduced, every action he performs, every word he utters, is based upon an actual statement and an actual action."

This, to be sure, has been done before. Greenberg has not attempted, I think, to blame but to meticulously fit the pieces into a balanced statement. At the same time he has reflected, through the character of Cdr. Lloyd Mark Bucher, a man posed with a problem Hamlet would have grasped. Bucher was faced with a modern variation on "To be or not to be."

At one side of Arena's floor sits the Navy Court of Inquiry; opposite are members of the House subcommittee conducting its hearings on the Pueblo. The center areas, ladders and catwalks above audience and stage, become the ship itself and the action darts between the two hearings, the incident itself and the North Korean prison quarters.

Review

"PUEBLO," Arena Stage, Zella Fichandler producing director, presents the premiere of a play by Stanley R. Greenberg. Setting by David R. Ballou. Lighting by Lee Watson. Sound by Paul Belknap. Costumes by Marjorie Shuman. Technical direction by Henry R. Corbin. Movement assistance by Virginia Freeman. Directed by Gene Frankel.

THE CAST

Lloyd Mark Bucher	Sheppard Steadwick
Bob	John Oliver
T. Harris	Don Adams
Congressman	Richard Bauer
Super C	Ned Beatty
Presiding Officer	Humphrey Davis
Admiral Meador	Richard Dix
McDevitt	Morris Enloe
Lacy	Michael Falkman
Congressional Chairman	Ben Kamen
S. Harris	Tom Keady
Signaller	Christopher Lohry
Schwartz	Tom Leonard
North Korean Officer	Alvin Long
McDevitt	Michael Lewis
Admiral Johnson	Richard Robery
Law, Clark	Rebecca Rogers
Count Counsel	Danipon Smith
Radio Operator	Michael Tucker
Goldman	Heward Whit
Kell	Bruce Wolff

A spotlight on him, Bucher explains his background, himself and his challenge. Toward him roll questions from a defensive Navy and an inquiring Congress, and around him surge the moments he recalls, an infinitely intricate design of play construction made immensely theatrical by Arena's resources and Gene Frankel's splendid direction.

Bucher's situation was that he had not been accurately informed about his ship's espionage mission, that it was not properly equipped for the situation which arose and that, since he could not destroy evi-

dence of the mission, he decided it was unreasonable to destroy his crew.

UNREASONABLE is the key thought; for war itself is so insanely unreasonable. So Bucher, warned by fire that already has killed one man, gives up his ship and, warned that "We'll kill the youngest first," signs the false confession. His men are alive, he survives, but under a cloud.

In strict Navy terms, unlikely as doing so successfully was, he should have destroyed his ship, company and self. What would have come from that, asks a congressman.

The Navy's responsibility is part of the record; the ship was unfit for its role, communications were slow and later waffled, and Rear Adm. Johnson's responses are not an impressive defense.

Still, Greenberg does not pour vitriol on the Navy nor its chiefs. He is provoking wider thoughts and questions. International law is one. Is such limited to those with whom we have an understanding? Is it grasped by barbarians? Do the niceties of chivalry extend into our age of deadly, far-flung impersonal forces?

Quoting from the North Korean officer, "Super C" lifts the Far East veil to give a notion of how we are viewed, but author Greenberg carefully does not side

with the enemy. He simply states the viewpoint and allows us to focus on our own awareness of life in police states.

As Bucher, and looking sometimes unconvincingly like him, Sheppard Steadwick gives a splendidly controlled, passionate performance. And I found Ned Beatty's "Super C" strikingly done. There are a whole range of other roles, all handled with assurance.

Frage! has achieved a sense of ensemble to group around the central figure, and there is a kind of slow motion choreography that works more often than it fails. The effect is to recapitulate, before the two investigating committees, the cruel tragedy in heavy action. Sound effects play, for once, a genuinely contributory role, the throb of engine, the rush of water, the arcing enemy plane. Technically, Arena's stage has been made ideal for a script which could be done in simpler ways. But those who see it here always will think of this factual record as a theatrical experience.